

**A PARADOX****NO. 2050****A SERMON****INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S DAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1888,*****DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON,*****AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON****ON A THURSDAY EVENING IN THE YEAR 1886.*****“When I am weak, then am I strong.”******2 Corinthians 12:10.***

THE expression is paradoxical, and seems somewhat singular; yet it was the experience of the apostle Paul, a man of calm spirit, by no means fanciful; a wise man, and far removed from a fanatic. It was the experience of one, who was led of the Spirit of God, and therefore it was a gracious experience; the experience of one who was a father in Israel, who could safely bid us to be imitators of him, even as he imitated the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore it was a safe experience. If we are weak, so was Paul; and if, like him, we are strong in our weakness we shall be in the best of company. If the same things are seen in us, which were worked in the apostle of the Gentiles, we may join with him in glorying in infirmities, because the power of Christ does rest upon us, and we may count ourselves happy that with such a saint we can cry, “When I am weak, then am I strong.”

**I.** Perhaps I can expound the text best if I first TURN IT THE OTHER WAY UP, and use it as a warning.

*When I am strong, then am I weak.* Perhaps, while thinking of the text thus turned inside out, we shall be getting light upon it to be used when we view it with the right side outwards, and see that *when we are weak, then we are strong.*

I am quite sure that some people think themselves very strong, and are not so. Their proud consciousness of fancied strength is the indication of a terrible weakness. We have among us *certain persons who think that they can do all that is needful for their own salvation* whenever they please to do so. They can perform all sorts of good works, or at least quite enough to carry them to heaven. Their first idea is that they are to be saved by their own doings, and they really expect to be so saved. They may admit that they have a few faults and flaws in their character, but these are so trifling as to be hardly worth mentioning, and God Almighty is too merciful to be very particular. Their lives have been excellent, their tempers amiable, their manners courteous, their spirit generous, and they quite believe that by keeping on at the same pace they will win the prize; if they do not, who will? The ship of their character is in fine condition; they have no leaks which the pumps cannot keep down; their sails are not rent, and they hope to sail into the haven of peace with a glorious cargo of merit, having an abundant entrance, and hearing a loud “Well done!” Ah, my friend! That consciousness of legal strength is a mere delusion, and it will have to be taken out of you. There is no going to heaven that way—by self and the works of self. Your error is a common one, but it is fatal. I have seen many epitaphs of persons, placed by the mistaken kindness of friends upon their tombstones, which I felt sure would have been sufficient to shut them out of heaven if they had been true. These departed worthies do not appear to have been sinners at all; their virtues were superlative, their faults non-existent. Such wonderful people would appear, from their epitaphs, to have flown up to the gates of heaven upon the wings of their own virtues, and to have entered there without a passport of mercy, as citizens by their own right of the New Jerusalem. I wonder how they would behave themselves in heaven, if they were really admitted there! All the rest are singing, “We have washed our robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”; but these needed no washing, and so they would be likely to strike up a little song by themselves, and sing, “Our robes never needed washing; we kept them white as snow.” What a discord that would create in the music of the skies! What a division of character and feeling would be found among celestials! I cannot see how there could be any harmony of sentiment among sinners saved by grace, and righteous ones who owed nothing to mercy, nothing to the atoning sacrifice.

No, my strong and virtuous hearer, you are under a grave delusion. There is a great similarity between your talk and the talk of that religious individual who went up to the temple in our Savior's days, and, standing before the thrice-holy God, dared to say, "God, I thank you that I am not as other men are." He was not justified that day, nor will you be. A poor tax-gatherer, despised by himself, and an outcast from his own people, stood in the temple at the same time, and all that he dared to say was, "God be merciful to me a sinner." This unworthy sinner went to his house justified, while the other worthy person was not accepted. If you think yourselves strong enough to procure heaven by your own efforts, you are ignorantly insulting the cross of Christ, for you seem to insinuate that your virtues can avail you without Jesus. If you really mean this, there is no less venom of rebellion against God in your self-righteousness than in the outward vice of those who make no pretense to godliness. For you to put your works in the place of Jesus is a blasphemy against the Savior's blood and righteousness. Why needed Christ to die if men could save themselves? Why need He bleed upon the cross if your merits will suffice to gain you a place among the blessed? There is a fatal weakness in the claim of that man who thinks himself strong enough to force his own passage to the throne of God; that weakness lies in the pride which insults the Crucified, the disloyalty which prefers itself to the royal Savior—

*"Perish the virtue, as it ought—abhorred,  
And the fool with it who insults his Lord."*

Listen to me a moment, and quit your fancied strength; you, my hearer, cannot keep the law of God, for you have already broken it. How can you preserve a crystal vase when you have already dashed it to atoms? You must now be saved by the merits and the strength of another, or not at all, for your own merit is out of the question, through past failure. That strength of yours, upon which you dote so much, is perfect weakness. May the Lord show you this, and make you faint at heart on that account, for then you shall be strong, with real and saving strength! Now your imaginary strength is making you really weak, and that boasted merit of yours is shutting you out from true righteousness. He that is strong in the notion of merit is weak even to utter folly before the God of truth.

"Yes," we hear you reply, "there is a gospel way of salvation. We know that there is, for you preach it continually. You tell us that men must repent, and believe the gospel; that they must be renewed in the spirit of their minds, and must both overcome sin, and follow after holiness." Yes, I do say all that, but what do you say to it? Is it really so that you find here a ground for your own strength? Do you say, "*I feel that I can repent whenever I please, and believe in Jesus when I choose?*" Ah! Then I must assure you that when you are strong in that way, you are weak. I never yet knew anybody repent who gloried in his power to repent; I never yet knew a man heart-broken for sin who boasted that he could break his own heart when and where he pleased. "What!" cries one, "Surely I can believe in Jesus Christ when I please!" I have not denied that statement, have I? But I tell you that your notion of power to believe is your weakness, and I would rather by half hear you cry, with deep solemnity, "Oh, that God would give me faith! Lord, help my unbelief!" Your sense of inability to believe in Christ would be a far better token for good, in my judgment, than your present flippant talk about believing when you like. Men who are in earnest talk not so; whatever their strength may be, they find it little enough in the hour of need. I beg to assure you that I have never known a man believe in Jesus who trusted that he could so believe; for his trust in his own believing kept him from trusting to Jesus, but I have known many a poor, struggling soul lie at the foot of the cross, and say, "Lord, help me to look to Jesus, and live," and God has helped him to give that look in which there is eternal life. While he has been praying, his prayer, yes, his weeping prayer, has had in it that very look to Jesus for which he was pleading. His sense of inability to believe has made him look to Jesus for believing, and he has found it in Him.

You say that you can turn your heart towards God whenever you please. I am not going into any dispute with you about your assertion, or the doctrine, which is supposed to support you in your profession of strength, but I will say this, your idea of having personal strength, with which to purify and renew your own heart—your idea that you can create in yourself a right spirit—your idea that you can raise yourself from your death in sin—is to me a prophecy of much evil for yourself. Where self is conspicuous, I see an omen of mischief, I see no good in this fine opinion of yourself, but if I heard you cry, "Create in me a clean heart, O God"—if I heard you say, "Lord, quicken me out of my death in sin"—if I saw you lying down before the Most High, and praying, "Turn me, and I shall be turned"—I should

have a far brighter hope of you. In your weakness you would become strong, but in your present strength, I am sure I see a great weakness, which is likely to be your ruin. O dear hearts, your best friend does not lie within your own doors. Your hope for better things shines yonder at the right hand of God, where the living Savior has all power given to Him in heaven and earth. Sinner, if you grow no sweeter flowers than the dunghill of your own nature can nourish, you will die amid poisonous weeds. If you never drink of better water than the filthy well of your own heart will yield, you will perish of thirst, or of a deadly draught. Another, and a better helper than one born in your house, must come this way. Help must be laid upon one that is mighty, exalted of the Lord out of the people, and endowed with divine power and Godhead, for only such a Savior, infinitely good and great, can save a soul so lost as yours. When you get down, down, down, into utter weakness, then you will be strong, because then you will rest upon the Lord's salvation, but as you are strong in your thoughts of yourself, you are kept from Jesus, and are weakness itself.

So far I have spoken by way of warning to unconverted people.

I desire now to say a word to those who profess to be Christians, and, let us hope, are so, but they are, in a measure, erring in the same way as those to whom I have spoken. They are remarkably strong; at least, in their own esteem they are very Samsons, although others fear that the Philistines will capture them. By this token may they know their own weakness—even by this, that they think themselves strong.

First, *many are wonderfully strong as to knowledge*. They know almost everything. If in any department they are a little short, they make up for it by knowing so much more in the other direction. If they are too narrow here, they overlap there. They are knowing men, and need no man to tell them so. They are instructed in the faith from pole to pole; they know both that which is afar off, and that which is near. An argument is a pleasure to them. They go into company where the eternal verities are denied, and feel a delight in taking sides. They will sit where the vital simplicities of God's word are set up like marks for boys to throw at, and they like the amusement, for it exercises their knowing faculty, and gives them a chance of showing their mental power. They are not children, but quite able to think for themselves. They are not credulous, but amazingly clear-headed and cultured. I have noticed these fine gentlemen have been the first to deny the faith, and to fall into all manner of heresies. Do you wonder? Those who are so very sure are always the most uncertain. I could instance some that had such confidence in themselves that they would have argued with the very fiend of hell on any question, for they felt that not even Satanic craft could conquer them, but at this present moment the prince of darkness holds them in his power. They hold no controversy with the devil now, for they are very largely agreed with him in assailing the gospel of God's grace. They have gone entirely over to the denial of everything that is gracious and holy and scriptural, and the main cause of their apostasy is their own invincible self-confidence. They were so strong that they became weaker than others. O brethren, when we are very wise in our own esteem, we are bordering upon fools, even if we have not already entered into that company. When we tremblingly sit at Jesus' feet, to learn everything fresh, and fresh from Him; when we shudder at anything that questions His Deity, or lowers His sacrifice; when we shut up a book and cast it from us, because we feel that it pollutes us with unbelief, then are we wise and strong. When the Word of the Lord is enough, then are we in the way of wisdom and strength. The man of one book is proverbially a terrible man, but the man of ten thousand books, who can baffle all adversaries and foil all foes, shall soon lie wounded on the plain, if he is not slain outright. Let us take heed unto ourselves, that we fall not through being headstrong, or strong in the head, which is much the same thing.

Again, I have noticed some professedly Christian people *wonderfully strong through experience*. Their experience has been very extensive, and the knowledge it has brought them they consider to be especially profound, and, consequently, they are not afraid of temptation, for they feel that they are too wise to be entrapped. They are so experienced now, that things which young people ought not to think of, they can do with impunity—so they foolishly dream. They can go just so far, and then stop, for they are fitted with the patent brakes of prudence. They are such good mountain climbers that they can stand on the edge of a precipice, and look over, and even hang over, without fear of their ever being giddy, and falling over. Of course they would not advise other people to go quite so far as they may safely go, but then, what is temptation to other men is no temptation to them. Their vessel is so tight and trim, and

they understand navigation so perfectly, that they rather like a tempest than not, just to show how well their vessel can behave in a storm. Ah me! When you next read the list of wrecks, you may expect to see the name of their ship among the castaways. Old birds may not be caught with chaff, but they can be shot with a gun. No one is out of danger, and no one is more in danger than the man who is carnally secure. Those who feel that their experience, be it what it may, only teaches them that the farther they can keep from temptation the better, these are in a better state. When experience drives us to pray with emphasis the prayer "Lead us not into temptation," then it is working aright. In the idea of strength and wisdom lurks an awfully perilous weakness, but in a sense of personal weakness dwells a real strength. If you are extremely jealous, conscientious, and watchful, many will tell you how weak you are, but you are, in reality, a strong man, because of your fear to encounter evil influences; in that fear lies one essential element of holy strength. While he that would rather brave temptation, because he feels so strong, shall find, it may be to his everlasting sorrow, how great his weakness is; he that shuns the appearance of evil, because of conscious weakness, shall find therein his security and strength. Oh, let none of us, because we are getting grey, suppose that we are not vulnerable to sin! Let us not dream that because we have been church members so many years, or even because we have sustained a long and useful ministry, that we are therefore beyond gunshot of the enemy, or without necessity to seek daily strength for daily duty. My brethren, we cannot perform the smallest duty aright apart from the help of God; neither can we be secure against even the crudest sin, apart from the perpetual guard of Him that keeps Israel. If we, in our self-conceit, write ourselves down among the mightiest, and forget our entire dependence upon heavenly grace, we may be left to prove, by unhappy experience, that, pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Let us note another point. I have known certain Christian people who thought themselves *singularly strong in the matter of wisdom and prudence*. They have been gifted with clear insight and a measure of shrewdness, and have, therefore, felt that their judgment on most subjects was that of an umpire. Have you ever noticed that the raw material of a very grossly foolish person is a cautious individual? The cunning are the readiest dupes when craft is busy in taking its prey. So, too, a wise man is needed if there is to be exhibited the worst form of folly. If we were called upon to select a man who, as to his life as a whole, perpetrated the greatest folly, we should mention Solomon. Yet he was the wisest of men. Yes, the cream of wisdom, when curdled, makes the worst of folly. Was ever man so insanely enthusiastic in vain pursuits as this master of all knowledge? Then, brethren, whenever we feel sure of our own superior intelligence, let us suspect ourselves of weakness. Let the same fear come upon us when we feel sure about our way, so sure that we think we need not pray about it, or in any manner wait for divine direction. Beware of those matters in which you think you cannot err. Men who have been wise in great difficulties have blundered fearfully where all was simple. The Israelites thought that the men who came to them begging for a league of brotherhood could not deceive them. It must be safe to be on good terms with these interesting strangers. Why, look, their shoes are well-near worn from their feet, and patched and clouted to the last degree! Their clothes, which, we doubt not, were new when they left their distant homes, are now threadbare, and their bread, which they took fresh from the oven, is stale with age. It is evident, upon the face of it, that they must have come from a very remote part of the world, and therefore a treaty with them will not interfere with the divine command. There can be no need to pray about a case so clear. Thus the Gibeonites deceived them, as we also shall be overreached when we are so exceeding sure of our course. Brethren, let us not be so wise as to dispense with our heavenly Counselor and Guide. Would not that be the height of madness? It is a salutary thing to feel that your case requires you to trust the helm of your ship with the divine Pilot. It is even a blessed thing to feel that you are shut up to faith, and must by absolute trust in God throw the responsibility of your action upon Him. I will give you an instance. Abraham, the father of the faithful, is placed in a peculiar position. God has commanded him to take his son Isaac, and offer him for a sacrifice. Here is a terrible puzzle. Here was enough to stagger any human mind. Surely it could not be right for a father to slay his son! How could it be wise to kill the son in whom all the promises of God were vested? The more you think of the case from a father's standpoint, the more it will perplex you. Abraham could not make anything out of it by his judgment, but he met it all by faith. All that he could say to Isaac was, "My son, God will provide Himself a Lamb." He was thus saying to himself, "The Lord will get me out of this difficulty." He had

no wisdom with which to conjecture how the affair would end; he had to cease from guessing, and just trust in his God. Abraham made no mistake in this. Oh, that we could do the same! Observe that same Abraham when he goes down to Egypt. His wife is exceedingly beautiful, and he fears that the king of Egypt will kill him in order to obtain his wife; what will he do? I can see a great many ways in which he might have warded off that evil. He was not called upon to go to Egypt at all, if he thereby risked his wife's honor, or, if he must go, he should have gone boldly, acknowledging his wife, and trusting both her and himself with the Lord. Instead of that, the patriarch begins by inducing Sarah to join with him in equivocation. "Say you are my sister." She was in some sense his sister, but it was using a word in a double sense for a deceitful purpose, and it was a pitiful thing for Abraham to do. Nor was it a prudent scheme after all, in fact, it was the cause of the very trouble which it sought to prevent. Sarah would not have been taken away from Abraham at all if Pharaoh had known that she was his wife; so that the wise was snared by his own craftiness. The Lord graciously delivered him, but in that very act left a root of bitterness behind to be his future plague. Pharaoh gave to him women servants, and I doubt not among the rest was Hagar, who became the object of sin, and the source of sorrow to the household. In the fancied strength of Abraham, by which he emulated the craft of other Orientals, he displayed his weakness, but in the other case, where no wit or wisdom could assist him, he cast himself upon the Lord, and in his weakness he behaved like the grand man that he really was. Brothers, let us confess ourselves fools, that we may be wise, for otherwise we shall fall into that other condition, of professing ourselves wise, and becoming fools. Let us ignore our wisdom, even if we have any. God alone is wise; he that trusts either his own heart or head is a fool. Lean not to your own understanding, but lean wholly upon the Lord, so shall you be established.

Further, dear friends, *we shall often find that our strength will lie in patience*—in extreme weakness which yields itself up to the will of God without the power or will to murmur. We sang in our hymn just now—

*"And when it seems no other chance or change  
From grief can set me free,  
Hope finds its strength in helplessness,  
And, patient, waits on You."*

I am sure that in reference to power, either to do or to suffer rightly, we are not strong when we compliment ourselves upon our ability, and we are strong when, under a sense of absolute inability, we depend wholly upon God. That sermon preached in the glory of our oratory turned out to be mere husks for swine; while that discourse which we delivered in weakness, with a humble hope that God would use it, proved to be royal meat for the Lord's chosen. That work which you performed in the vigor of your unquestioned talent came to nothing, while that quiet act which you washed with your tears, and perfumed with your prayers, will live, and yield you sheaves. Creature strength brings forth nothing which has life in it; only the seed which the Creator puts into the hand of our weakness will produce a harvest. It is well to be nothing; it is better still to be "less than nothing." We ought to dread a sense of capacity, for it will render us incapable, but a sense of utter incapacity apart from God is a fit preparation for being used by the Lord. "Unto them that have no might He increases strength."

So it is in bearing as well as acting. If we say, concerning sickness, "I shall never be impatient. I can bear it like a stoic." What of that? You will then have done no more than many have done before you with no great gain to themselves or to others. But if, bowing your head before the Lord, you wait His sovereign will, and say, "Lord help me. If your left hand shall smite me, let your right hand sustain me. I am willing to drink this bitter cup, saying, 'Not as I will, but as You will.' Lord, help me!"—you shall bear up triumphantly, and come out of the furnace refined, to the praise and the glory of your God. When you fancy that you are strong to suffer, you will fail, but in conscious weakness you will be enabled to play the man.

I have now done with the text, as I have turned it upside down. May God bless it to any here who feel high and mighty, by causing it to put them in their proper place.

**II.** Now, let us take our text THE RIGHT WAY UPWARDS. "When I am weak, then am I strong." "When" and "then" are the two pivots of the text—the hinges upon which it turns.

“When I am weak.” What does that mean? It means when the believer is *consciously weak*, when he painfully feels, and distinctly recognizes, that he is weak, then he is strong. In truth, we are always weak, whether we know it or not, but when we not only believe this to be the fact, but see it to be the fact—then it is that we are strong. When it is forced home upon us, that we are less than nothing and vanity—when our very soul echoes and re-echoes that word, “Without Me you can do nothing”—then it is that we are strong.

When he is *growingly weak*. Yes, for he sees his own weakness more and more clearly as he advances; as he grows stronger in faith he is much more conscious of the weakness of the flesh. I talked about my weakness from this platform five-and-twenty years ago, but I stand here and tremble under it now to a far greater degree than I did in my younger and more vigorous time. I knew it three-and-thirty years ago, when I first spoke to you, but I did not know it as I know it now. I was then weak, and I owned it, but I am now weak, and groan about it almost involuntarily. Yes, and I sometimes sing because of my weakness, learning to glory in my infirmities because the power of Christ does rest upon me. When we are growingly weak, when we become weaker and weaker, when we seem to faint into a deeper swoon than ever as to our own strength, till death is written upon every power that we once thought we had, and we feel that we can do absolutely nothing apart from the Holy Spirit, then we are strong, indeed.

We are strong, too, when we feel *painfully weak*. It is well when we mourn because we are so weak, and cry out to ourselves, “My weakness, my weakness, woe unto me! When I would do good, evil is present with me. When I would rise to heaven, the body of this death detains me. I would do great things for God, but I have no might. Alas for my weakness!” At such a time we are really rising, and are bringing most glory to God. These are growing pains—agonies such as none know but the truly and growingly spiritual. A painful weakness is strength. It may seem a paradox, but it is true.

We are strong when we are *contritely weak*. When we confess that much of our weakness is our fault—a weakness which we ought to have overcome—even then we have in that weakness a real strength. The sort of weakness that makes a man say, “I cannot be any stronger, I am doing my best,” is not strength, but folly; but that weakness which makes you lament your failures and deplore your shortcomings, has in it a holy stimulus and force. That weakness which makes you dissatisfied with all you are and all you do, is goading you on to better and stronger things. If you feel that even when most earnest you have not prayed as you could wish, there is evidently strength in your desires, and your desires are prayers. If after any service you pour forth showers of penitential tears because the service was imperfect, there is evidently a strong soul of obedience within you. When you can neither repent, nor believe, nor love as you wish to do, you are repenting, believing, and loving with a strength which is more true than apparent. It is the will with which we act which is the strength of the action, and when the will is so powerful that it makes us mourn because we cannot find how to perform its bidding, then are we strong according to the divine measurement of strength. Contrite weakness is spiritual strength.

When a man is *thoroughly weak*—not only partially, but altogether weak—then is he strong. When apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, he is utter weakness and nothing more—then it is that he is strong. Let me persuade you to make a full confession of weakness to the Lord. Say, “Lord, I cannot do what I ought to do; I cannot do what I want to do; I cannot do what I used to do; I cannot do what other people do; I cannot do what I mean to do; I cannot do what I am sure I shall do; I cannot do what I feel impelled to do, and over this sinful weakness I mourn.” Then add, “Lord, I long to serve You perfectly, yet I cannot do it. Unless You help me I can do nothing aright. There will be no good in my actions, my words, my feelings, or my desires, unless You continue to fill me with Your own holy energy. Lord, help me! Lord, help me!” Brother, you are strong while you plead in that fashion. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you, and he will strengthen you, now that you are emptied of self. How true it is, “When I am weak, then am I strong!”

I have brought out the “when.” Now lend me your ears and hearts for just a minute, while I bring out the “then.” “Then am I strong.” When is that?

Why, a man is strong when he is consciously weak, because now he has reached the truth. He really is weak, and if he does not know that he is so, he is under the influence of a falsehood. Now a lie is a thing of weakness. Lying strength is all fluff and foam, a mere appearance, a mockery, a delusion. Nothing hinders from getting the reality like contentment with a mere appearance. The true heart is heartily



sick of shows and shams, and it cries, "Lord, help me to get rid of these shadows! Help me to come to the truth! Help me to deal with realities!" When you are made to feel your utter weakness, you are on sure ground of truth—unpleasant truth, no doubt, yet sure truth. You are now on safe ground touching fundamentals, and making sure work. What you now do will be soundly done. All the while that we keep building on a sandy made-up foundation, we are piling up that which will, in all probability, come down even faster than we put it up. While the rotten rubbish remains on the spot, you cannot do anything worth doing, but if that accumulation can be carted away, there will seem to be a great hole, but you will get down to the real bottom, and get a foundation, and then what you build will be worth putting up, because it will stand. Therefore, a man becomes strong when he is consciously weak, because he is on the truth, and is not being flattered by false hopes.

Next, he will be strong because *he will only go with a commission to support him*. He will not be eager to run without being sent. He says within himself, when he proposes a service to himself, "No, I am too weak to undertake anything of my own head." He will wait for a call. This is not the kind of man that will climb up into a pulpit, and from a dizzy brain pour out nonsense. He will not crave to lead, for he feels that he needs much help even to follow. He feels himself too weak to set up for a master in Israel. This is not the kind of man that will venture into argument with skeptics for the fun, or for the glory, of the thing. Oh, no; he is too weak for that. He says, "If I am called to defend the faith, I will do it in God's strength, hoping that it will be given me in the same hour what I shall speak. If I am called to preach, I will preach, and nobody shall stop me, for the Lord will be with my mouth." But, you see, until the man is conscious of his own weakness, he will run without being sent, and there is nobody as weak as that man; no one as weak as the man who has no commission from God, and no promise of help from Him. Such a man will be thinking of this, and thinking of that, and running for this, that, and the other, because he has a lot of wasted energy which he wants to use somewhere or somehow. Could we once see him consciously weak we should hear him say, "Here am I, send me!" in answer to the question, "Whom shall I send?" Then he would not go a warfare at his own charges, but he would draw upon the all-sufficiency of God, and find himself equal to every emergency.

The man who is consciously weak is strong, next, because of *the holy caution that he will be sure to use*. He will be on his guard, because he does not feel able to cope with adversaries. He will ask for a convoy for his little boat, for he is aware of pirates. If this weak man has to pass through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, depend upon it he will carry in his hand the weapon of All-prayer, like a drawn sword. The man that has strength goes hurrying on over hedge and ditch, and soon comes into mischief, but the consciously weak pilgrim keeps to the high-road, and travels carefully, and hence he is strong. Fear is a notably good housekeeper; she may not keep a luxurious table, but she always locks the doors at night, and takes care of all under her charge. Holy caution begets prudence, and prudence, by fostering vigor, and crying for heavenly aid, becomes strength.

Moreover, when a man is weak, then is he strong, because *he is sure to pray*, and prayer is power. The man who laments his weakness is sure to cry to the strong for strength. The more his weakness presses on him, the more he will pray. While he can do without his God he will do without his God; but when his own weakness becomes utter and entire, and he is ready to perish, then he turns unto his Lord, and is made strong. The utterly weak cry out unto God as nobody else does. He is too weak to play at praying; he groans, he sighs, he weeps. In his abject weakness he prevails, as Jacob did. He wrestled all night, but now at last the angel has touched the hollow of his thigh, and made his sinew shrink, and he cannot wrestle any longer. What will he do now? He falls, and as he falls he grasps his antagonist, and holds Him fast, crying, "I will not let You go, except You bless me." As much to say, "I cannot wrestle with You, I cannot try another fall, but I can and will hold You fast. The dead weight of my weakness makes me hold You as an anchor holds a ship. I will not let You go, except You bless me." The weaker a man is in himself the stronger he is in prayer, if he makes use of his weakness as an appealing argument—"Lord, if I were strong, You might leave me. Do not leave me, for I am weakness itself. I am the feeblest child in all Your family, leave me not, neither forsake me. If You leave any, leave not your poor dying infant that can hardly wail out its griefs." Weakness, as a plea with God in prayer, becomes a source of strength.

When we are weak we are strong, again, because then *we are driven away from self to God*. All strength is in God, and it is well to come to the one solitary storehouse and source of might. There is no power apart from God. As long as you and I look to the creature, we are looking to a cracked, broken cistern, that holds no water, but when we know that it is broken, and that there is not a drop of water in it, then we hasten to the great fountain and well-head. While we rest in any measure upon self, or the creature, we are standing with one foot on the sand, but when we get right away from human nature because we are too weak to have the least reliance upon self whatever, then we have both feet on the rock, and this is safe standing. If you believe in the living God, and if all your own existence is by believing, you live at a mighty rate. But if you believe in God in a measure, and if, at the same time, you trust yourself in a measure, you are living at a dying rate, and half the joy which is possible to you is lost. You are taking in bread with one hand, and poison with the other; you are feeding your soul with substance and with shadow, and that makes a sorry mixture. When the shadow is clean taken away, and you have nothing but the substance, then are you a strong man, fed upon substantial meat.

Last of all, dear friends, I believe that, when a man is weak, he becomes strong to a large extent, because *his weakness compels him to concentrate all his faculties*. A sense of weakness brings out all the forces of a resolute spirit, and leads him to call in all the energy within his reach. When I have preached to you in extreme weakness, as I have often done, when I have afterwards read the sermon I have been much more satisfied with it, than I have been with others in which I felt more pleasure at the time. God helps us most when we most need His help, and, besides that, the man himself is, by his weakness, forced to use himself right up. When a man feels himself to be rather a large vessel, he puts in the tap somewhere near the top, and only a small supply flows out to the people, but when he is, in his own feelings, like a poor little cask with only a small supply in it, he puts the tap right down at the bottom, and permits all that is in the barrel to flow forth. Many a poor, weak brother, who says all the little that he knows, give forth more instruction than the learned divine who only favors his people with a small portion of his vast stores. When a man, in serving God, spends himself to the last farthing, he will often far more enrich his hearers than the man of ten talents who uses his resources with a prudent stinginess. Dear brother, it will often be a good thing for you to feel, “Now, God helping me, I must do my very utmost at this time. I have so little ability that every faculty within me must be wide awake, and serve God at its best.” Thus your weakness will arouse you, and set you on fire, and, by the blessing of God, it will be the means of gaining you strength.

Very well, then, let us pick up our tools and go to our work rejoicing, feeling—Well, I may be weaker, or I may be stronger in myself, but my strength is in my God. If I should ever become stronger, then I must pray for a deeper sense of weakness, lest I become weak through my strength. And if I should ever become weaker than I am, then I must hope and believe that I am really becoming stronger in the Lord. Whether I am weak or strong, what does it matter? He who never fails and never changes, will perfect His strength in my weakness, and this is glory to me. Amen.

## PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—2 CORINTHIANS 12.

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